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Silence as presence, silence as non-human in the debris of state violence

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Within critical political research, silence is frequently understood as something attributable to the action or inaction of political groups. It is also taken as an absence, something which is only comprehensible in relation to its supposed opposite – the speech of a political actor. In this way, silence has been conceptualised as a only having significance in terms of whether it communicates: that is, whether it represents the negation of speech and thus the loss or obscuration of meaning, or whether it can actually convey meaning from one political actor to another, for instance, by conveying resistance to hegemonic discourses (Hansen, 2000; Spivak, 1999). This paper briefly places in doubt both silence as absence and silence as solely attributable to human action, by considering two aesthetically-similar photographs related to practices of state violence.

The first photograph shows the immediate aftermath of an Israeli air strike on Gaza City during the Israeli military assault of the Gaza Strip in summer 2014. In its circulation by the British *Daily Mail*, the photograph was captioned: “Smoke and fire from the explosion of an Israeli strike rise over Gaza City as Israel continued its bombardment of the besieged territory today” (Reilly and Gale, 2014; Figure 1). The image shows dozens of tightly-packed buildings viewed from a high angle and from a distance, with two dark billows of smoke and a ball of fire towering over those buildings on the near horizon and reaching high into the clear sky.

The second photograph is of the aftermath of a covert U.S. drone strike reportedly carried out on 15 October 2014 in Shabwa province, Yemen. A Twitter feed run by data artist Josh Begley, 'Dronestream', reported the attack with an accompanying photograph seemingly taken from a mobile phone at the scene of the strike (Begley, 2014; Figure 2). The image shows the burnt-out chassis of a car with a flaming front-right tyre, motionless in a flat landscape and surrounded only by an expanse of sand and a small sparse crowd of onlookers. The clear sky is punctuated only by birds flying overhead and some trees and mountains on the horizon in the far distance.



Figure 1: photograph of reported Israeli air strike in Gaza City on 22 July 2014 (Reilly and Gayle, 2014)



Figure 2: Reported photograph of U.S. drone strike on 15 October 2014 in Shabwa province, Yemen (Begley, 2014)

The two photographs share aesthetic qualities: formally, they both centre on a cluster of fire with smoke rising from it. In both cases, the smoke drifts towards the edge of the frame, encouraging viewers to follow its drift towards the empty horizon. Finally, in neither photograph are the casualties of the strike *visibly* present. There is no blood, no torn limbs. Yet the contextual framing of each photograph by accompanying news accounts of the strikes shaped implicit conveyances of *what* is being shown in each photo; this in turn shaped the conveyed meaning of each strike. The Israeli strike was framed as a glimpse of ongoing bombardment: Israel is “continu[ing] to devastate the Gaza Strip with air strikes and artillery today” as its “warplanes bombarded a wide range of targets”, states the news item that features the photograph (Reilly and Gayle, 2014). The image, then, is framed as *showing* an ongoing event of an *unfolding* military action, as being 'in the middle' of that action.

An accompanying account of how Israel “launched a massive aerial bombardment on July 8” and an official statement from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu “urg[ing] the international community to hold Hamas accountable for the latest round of violence” together frame the image as showing an ongoing *overt* military operation, an operation openly admitted to and publicly presented by the state (ibid). The image therefore appears to show the event without obscuration; viewers are not encouraged to think that the image is somehow incomplete on the terms set by its framing. Despite the lack of visibility, then, those killed and injured by the strike are figured as *being there*, in those buildings and on those streets, part of the conveyed meaning of what is shown.

The drone strike photograph, by contrast, is figured as uneventful, as being unable to reveal an ongoing event. Begley's tweet links to a *Xinhua* article which reports that the “air raid” in which “[f]our people were killed” has been and gone. A Toyota Hilux had been “travelling in the Bin Aasf village in Shabwa province” when it was hit by “U.S. drone missiles” (*Xinhua*, 2014). Next to this, the accompanying image emphasises its dissimilarity with the purported event: there is little sense of impactful movement, of objects hitting one another, nor is there any seeming impending danger to the people standing around. The image now appears to show the arbitrary remainders of an unseen event. Confirmation of the strike from a local security official speaking “on condition of anonymity” juxtaposes the uneventful debris of this rumoured event (ibid). This juxtaposition *produces* a silence: it encourages public awareness of silence from the state in response to this debris, with only an anonymous Yemeni official and journalistic photography

available to confirm the event. This silence is an absence of speech, yes, but one which exists within representational markers such that it attains a particular *presence* for those viewing the image and reading the article.

Finally, this conveyed state silence juxtaposes the apparent uneventfulness of the strike debris to allude to the strike's possible covertness. That the debris fails to show the event unfolding and remains unacknowledged by the state hints at the event having been a secret kept by the state from the public. This suspicion of secrecy then implicitly frames what the image shows. What first appeared arbitrary now appears significant *because* it is arbitrary, that is, because it has apparently escaped or avoided that secretion. The debris is therefore figured as possibly revealing things which would otherwise have gone unknown, unnoticed, owing to state secrecy. While the accompanying article indicates that the casualties were “[f]our suspected al-Qaida fighters” (ibid) and Begley's tweet caption states that “[f]our people were killed” (Begley, 2014), the secrecy framing highlights that these suspicions remain unconfirmed in the non-bodily smoking debris left behind in the public sphere. Unlike the Israeli strike image, these four people are made conspicuous in their absence from public debris. Nor are the criteria by which they were targeted present; that absence too is emphasised by this framing of the debris and rumours left behind. In other words, awareness of state secrecy *produces*, or makes present, silences within the material (and less-than-material) debris of the strike. This representation of a drone strike does not attribute these silences to a human political actor, to their purposeful actions or inactions. These silences are figured as residing within non-human materials, a burnt-out chassis and smoke, or within circulating rumour. They therefore do not communicate in some intentional fashion, but they *do* shape the conveyed meaning of what is shown, figuring this debris as inscrutable, as lacking clarity.

Two aesthetically-similar images, then, can make present and absent different kinds of speech and silences for viewers, depending upon how those images are contextualised and implicitly framed. Silence is doing something in this Shabwa strike image without being conveyed by a human actor and without always being attributed to any such actor.

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